

## CHAPTER 6

### *Francisco de Quevedo: the force of eloquence*

#### I

The *Flores* of Espinosa (1605) includes eighteen poems by Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645) – a high proportion for a poet at the beginning of his career, and a sure indication of Espinosa's taste for the new. Like Lope de Vega (and unlike Góngora), Quevedo was also a prolific writer in other genres: his two most famous prose works, the *Vida del Buscón* (Life of the Swindler; 1626) and the satirical fantasies of the *Sueños* (Visions; 1627) – both begun when he was still in his twenties – are among the masterpieces of the period, and the many volumes of didactic writings, on subjects ranging from statecraft to Stoic philosophy, are remarkable both for their erudition and for the unremitting seriousness of their moral arguments. Given the sheer size and variety of such an *oeuvre*, generalization seems especially hazardous; yet, as Claudio Guillén points out, there is a real sense in which Quevedo's work as a whole constitutes a body of 'writing' – an *écriture* – which deliberately cuts across conventional notions of genre as a means of liberating the powers of language itself.<sup>1</sup>

Where the poetry is concerned, this involves both Quevedo's attitude to his models and his trust in the strengths of traditional rhetoric. Such matters, moreover, are not solely literary: insofar as they affect the composition of particular poems, they also raise the whole question of the 'self' which is being projected through the medium of language, and of the reader's response, both emotional and intellectual, to the words he is made to re-enact. And as we shall see, to realize the full implications of this is to by-pass the kind of circular argument which draws autobiographical inferences from the poetry only to project them back on it in different forms.

If we turn to the biographical facts, on the other hand, the signs of a strong personality are very clear. What strikes one most forcibly, perhaps, is Quevedo's closeness to important public figures and events: his father was secretary to the Empress María of Austria and later to Queen Ana, wife of Philip II; in 1613, Quevedo himself went to Naples as private secretary to the Duque de Osuna, Viceroy of Sicily, and was entrusted with a number of crucial diplomatic missions. After Osuna's disgrace in 1621, Quevedo was banished from Court and for a time imprisoned; shortly afterwards, however, his fortunes rose again as a result of his good relations with the new favourite, Olivares (later to become one of his most powerful enemies). As John Elliott has shown, there is a curious kind of complementarity in the relationship between Quevedo and Olivares, as if each helped to make and unmake the other; both men seem driven by a combination of idealism and self-interest, and Olivares, for a time at least, appears to have shared Quevedo's version of Christian Stoicism.<sup>2</sup> By 1634, however (the date of his ill-advised marriage), Quevedo's criticisms of the style of Olivares's government, as well as his changing perception of Olivares himself, were becoming increasingly obvious, a process which eventually led to his three years' imprisonment (1639-43) for reasons which remain obscure, but which may have involved treasonable dealings with the French. Finally, after the fall of Olivares, Quevedo was released, broken in health, though he continued to write on his estate of La Torre de Juan Abad in the province of Ciudad Real and later at Villanueva de los Infantes, where he died.

Faced with the dramatic quality of such a career, critics have often been tempted to equate what is known of Quevedo himself with the powerful *persona* which seems to emerge from many of the poems. Certain satirical pieces, it is true, can be connected with actual events or with particular relationships; nevertheless, in most instances, the gap between poems and biography remains obstinately wide, and attempts to close it have more often than not tended to distort the nature of the poetry itself.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, if one looks beyond the more public aspects of Quevedo's biography to the kind of attitudes which might link the life to the writings, a particular cast of mind begins to appear which can best be described as 'conservative'. In social terms, this has to do with Quevedo's status as a 'precarious aristocrat' (Guillén's phrase),<sup>4</sup> as someone who is neither a professional scholar nor in the conventional sense of the word a courtier,

and whose economic security is never assured. This may help to explain his contempt for the trades and professions – a frequent target of his satire – as well as his dislike of popular values and speech. At a more abstract level, it may also account for a kind of inverted patriotism in which the denunciation of popular evils is set against a vaguely imagined feudal past whose simple justice and purity of national intentions are the necessary antidote to a corrupt and over-sophisticated civilization.<sup>5</sup> And running through all this is the mistrust of change expressed in the opening pages of his *Marco Bruto* (Marcus Brutus; 1631):

The world was lost through wishing to be otherwise, and men are lost by wishing to be different from themselves. Novelty is so little satisfied with itself that inasmuch as it is displeased by that which has been, just so does it weary of that which is.<sup>6</sup>

Transposed into literary terms, it is this same suspicion of change, of running counter to what he takes to be the genius of the language, which informs Quevedo's attacks on *culteranismo* and to a lesser extent his strictures on the poetic vocabulary of Herrera.<sup>7</sup> The most obvious sign of this is his decision to edit the work of two sixteenth-century poets, the great religious writer Luis de León (1527–91) and the otherwise unknown Francisco de la Torre. His polemical intention is clear: both editions were published in 1631, four years after the death of Góngora, whose poems were already beginning to take on the status of a classic. And in the long letter to Olivares which serves as a prologue to the poems of Luis de León, he writes what amounts to a defence of older standards:

In the first part... the diction is lofty [*grande*], proper, beautiful and fluent; of such purity that it is neither disqualified by commonness nor made strange by what is inappropriate. His whole style, with studied majesty, is suited to the greatness of the matter [*sentencia*], which does not display itself ambitiously outside the body of the discourse, nor hide itself in darkness, or rather lose itself in the affected confusion of figures and in a flood of foreign words.<sup>8</sup>

Quevedo, of course, is not the only writer of the time to attack *gongorismo* in the interests of 'clarity'. Where he differs, say, from a minor poet like Jáuregui is in his consistent application of the principle of decorum, not just as a test of other poets' intentions, but as the basis of his own poetic practice at a time when other criteria

were beginning to qualify the underlying assumptions of Renaissance poetics. Again, this suggests a conservative stance: an attempt to preserve the discriminating powers of traditional rhetoric in the face of competing kinds of persuasiveness, not least by an appeal to earlier models. Two points follow from this. One is that what has often been described as Quevedo's 'modernity' – the sense in which he appears to speak directly to a twentieth-century reader – may result, paradoxically, from just this archaizing tendency; the bare diction and violent imagery of some of the best-known sonnets at times seem to echo an early sixteenth-century poet like Boscán,<sup>9</sup> and their argumentative rhetoric, though entirely explicable in Renaissance terms, may owe something to the cruder, though no less insistent, logic of *cancionero* poetry. The other concerns Quevedo's relation to *conceptismo* and to the theory of wit which is usually assumed to lie behind it. Modern critics – as I myself did in chapter 2 (see above, pp. 57–9) – will often take a Quevedo poem in order to demonstrate the workings of the poetic conceit. Provided one confines oneself to the way language actually functions within a particular poem, this seems quite legitimate. To go on from this, however, to regard Quevedo as the supreme example of a *conceptista* poet within the terms defined by, say, Gracián, is to misrepresent the character of his own poetics. The fact that for Gracián the great exponent of the *concepto* is Góngora, not Quevedo, should put us on our guard. More specifically, Gracián's attempt to give an aesthetic dimension to the *ingenio*,<sup>10</sup> or the Italian theorists' insistence on 'wonder' have no counterpart in Quevedo. Thus, as Paul Julian Smith has argued: 'The theorists' emphasis on the beautiful as the end of wit (as opposed to the 'truth' of dialectic) is quite alien to the more serious conception of poetics adopted by Quevedo...' <sup>11</sup> This 'more serious conception of poetics' does not, of course, exclude the use of *conceptos*, which at times may overlap quite strikingly with the theory of wit; what it *does* mean is that, from Quevedo's point of view, such verbal strategies need no special pleading, but can be justified entirely in terms of accepted rhetorical practice.

At one extreme, then, Quevedo rejects both *culto* vocabulary and the style that goes with it. At the other, as his comments on Luis de León make clear, he objects just as strongly to popular language:

Petronius Arbiter [the author of the *Satyricon*] expressed it better than anyone. One must avoid all base words and choose those which are remote

from the common people, so that one may be able to say: I despise the profane crowd.<sup>12</sup>

Though this is a commonplace of neo-Aristotelian poetics, such dismissiveness may seem strange on the part of a writer whose satirical verse, like much of his prose, shows an absolute mastery of common idiom, from popular bawdy to the highly specialized slang (*germanía*) of the criminal underworld. The gap between theory and practice, however, may not be as great as it appears at first sight. Though Quevedo regards popular poetry, for instance, not only as bad, but as in some sense an offence to civilized discourse, he is nevertheless fascinated by the possibilities which the popular lexicon offers for parody and burlesque. At times, to be sure, it is hard to distinguish between imitation and genuine creation. What seems clear, on the other hand, is the effect of distancing he often achieves by ascribing such language, not to his own poetic *persona*, but to an invented character whose mode of speech forms part of the parody. Moreover, as we shall see in some of the poems I discuss in the next section, even where the controlling 'voice' of the poem is the poet's own, the presence of 'base' words, far from offending against decorum, creates the kind of 'diminishing' effect which is fully allowed for in Renaissance theory.

## II

All this points to the astonishing power of verbal play which is the dominating feature of Quevedo's work. In his poetry, as in much of the prose, this play takes on many forms, most conspicuously in the large body of satirical verse which spans practically the whole of his career. Here, as with Góngora, 'satirical' can only be an approximate term; satire and burlesque are often virtually interchangeable, and both frequently involve what James Iffland terms the 'grotesque': 'the co-presence of laughter and something which is incompatible with laughter'.<sup>13</sup> As Iffland goes on to say, the sheer virtuosity of such writing should deter us from seeking any unifying intention or persistent frame of mind; time and again, the mercurial quality of Quevedo's imagination – his ability to seize on the slightest hint of an alternative meaning – creates the kind of verbal effect which seems to detach itself from the apparent subject of the poem. Thus in the self-mocking ballad which begins 'Parióme adrede mi

madre ...' (My mother gave birth to me on purpose ...; B, p. 842),<sup>14</sup> the speaker describes his horoscope in a splendid series of *double-entendres*:

Nací debajo de Libra,  
tan inclinado a las pesas,  
que todo mi amor le fundo  
en las madres vendederas... (lines 17–20)

I was born under Libra, so inclined to weights that I base all my love on mothers who sell their daughters...

The train of associations is clear enough: Libra (the Scales) implies weights ('pesas'), which in turn suggest buying and selling; yet the women shopkeepers ('las madres vendederas') are also mothers who sell their daughters – a possibility one could hardly have predicted at the start. Elsewhere, as in one of the frequent descriptions of ugly women, 'Viejecita, arredro vayas...' (Get back, little old woman ...; B, p. 977), the meaning may be more compressed:

Cuantos a boca de noche  
aguardan sus enemigos,  
a la orilla de tus labios  
aciertan hora y camino... (lines 57–60)

All those who wait for their enemies at nightfall on the edge of your lips have hit on the right place and the right road.

Here, as so often with Quevedo's use of popular expressions, the effect depends on taking a cliché literally: 'a boca de noche' usually means 'at nightfall'; its literal meaning, however, is 'at the mouth of night', so that, by an astonishing twist of the imagination, the woman's cavernous mouth becomes a haunt of robbers and assassins.

These two examples show not only the characteristic riddling quality of Quevedo's wit ('what is the connection between a sign of the zodiac and a woman who sells her daughter?') but also the way in which a poem may suddenly refer to a whole new range of experience – the worlds of commercialized sex and of criminals who wait for their victims at dusk – by picking up an apparently casual verbal hint. And often such allusions have a topical resonance which links them firmly to Quevedo's own society, as in the opening of one of his most famous *letrillas*, 'Poderoso caballero es don Dinero ...' (A powerful knight is Sir Money ...; B, p. 734):

Madre, yo al oro me humillo;  
él es mi amante y mi amado,

pues, de puro enamorado,  
 de contino anda amarillo;  
 que pues, doblón o sencillo,  
 hace todo cuanto quiero,  
*poderoso caballero*  
*es don Dinero.*

Nace en las Indias honrado  
 donde el mundo le acompaña;  
 viene a morir en España,  
 y es en Génova enterrado.  
 Y pues quien le trae al lado  
 es hermoso, aunque sea fiero,  
*poderoso caballero*  
*es don Dinero...*

(lines 1–16)

Mother, I bow to gold; he is my lover and my beloved, since, through sheer loving, he constantly looks pale; and since, whether doubloon or lesser coin, he does everything I want, *a powerful knight is Sir Money*. He is born honourably in the Indies, where the world waits on him; he comes to die in Spain and is buried in Genoa. And since he who has him at his side is handsome, though he be ugly, *a powerful knight is Sir Money*.

What gives this poem its irresistible driving force is the parody of the traditional girl's lament to her mother; the replacement of the conventional lover by the powerful figure of Money – also seen, of course, as a lover – gives rise to a series of statements whose key terms consciously function on two levels. Thus in the first stanza, gold is 'pale' (literally, 'yellow') by nature and because this is the colour of lovesickness; and in the second stanza, what was at the time the usual itinerary of gold – from the Indies to Spain and thence to the vaults of the Genoese bankers – simultaneously suggests the life pattern of the 'honourable' suitor. (Notice, however, the further innuendo in line 10: great lords have large retinues, but people flock to the Indies in search of fortune.)

At this point, a question arises: granting the verbal brilliance of such poems, how seriously is Quevedo engaging with a reality outside the poetry? One possible answer is suggested by Claudio Guillén: despite its frequent vehemence, there is no sense, he argues, that Quevedo's satirical writing is aimed at reforming, or replacing, existing attitudes or social structures. What militates against this is the kind of conservatism we have already seen in other connections: not so much the wish to keep things as they are, as the feeling that no

fundamental change is really possible – an attitude borne out by the pessimism of much of his other writing. So, from this point of view, Quevedo's obsessive verbal inventiveness becomes a way of manipulating – of defacing – a reality from which there is no escape, a supreme example, in Guillén's words, of the 'exasperation to which the most sombre conservative disposition may lead'.<sup>15</sup>

This is an attractive thesis, though, like most attempts to define Quevedo's satire as a whole, it fits certain poems better than others, where the energy of the writing often seems to come more from pleasure in its own skill than from any deeper psychological urgings. It would be wrong, nevertheless, to regard Quevedo's satirical poetry as mainly a matter of verbal play: satire, almost by definition, has a serious ethical function, a power of indictment which creates its effects through the precise handling of rhetoric. Such effects, moreover, are sometimes all the more powerful when achieved by indirection and insinuation; thus in many of Quevedo's poems, verbal dexterity does not so much replace ideological purpose as channel it in unexpected ways. Consider, for instance, the well-known sonnet originally entitled 'A un nariz' (To a Nose; B, p. 562):<sup>16</sup>

Érase un hombre a una nariz pegado,  
érase una nariz superlativa,  
érase una alquitara medio viva,  
érase un peje espada mal barbado;  
era un reloj de sol mal encarado,  
érase un elefante boca arriba,  
érase una nariz sayón y escriba,  
un Ovidio Nasón mal narigado.  
Érase el espolón de una galera,  
érase una pirámide de Egito,  
los doce tribus de narices era;  
érase un naricísimo infinito,  
muchísimo nariz, nariz tan fiera,  
que en la cara de Anás fuera delito.

There was once a man attached to a nose, there was once a superlative nose, there was once a crucible half alive, there was once a badly bearded swordfish; there was a badly adjusted sundial, there was once an elephant face upwards, there was once a scribe-and-executioner nose, an Ovidius Naso badly nosed. There was once the bowsprit of a galley, there was once a pyramid of Egypt, it was the twelve tribes of noses; there was once an infinite noses of noses [literally, 'nosiest'], a great quantity of nose, a nose so fierce that on the face of Annas it would have been a crime.



An 'innocent' reading of this poem would almost certainly dwell on the accumulation of ingenious metaphors, the series of fantastic hyperboles which seems increasingly to detach itself from any recognizable 'subject'. What we may fail to notice – though it is hard to imagine any seventeenth-century reader doing so – is that this is a strongly anti-Semitic poem, a fact which makes for an altogether different kind of reading. For anyone who knows the rest of Quevedo's work, there are a number of possible clues: the stereotype of the long-nosed Jew occurs frequently in his other writings; the 'executioner(s) and scribe(s)' are those responsible for the condemnation and death of Christ, the delegates, so to speak, of the 'twelve tribes' of Israel; similarly, Annas, whose name in Spanish provides an easy pun ('A-nás' = 'noseless'), was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest before whom Christ was brought to trial. Nevertheless, in a first reading the poem may seem curiously disjointed: the repeated verb 'érase' – the Spanish equivalent of 'once upon a time there was' – suggests the opening of a 'story' which never actually materializes, and the various Jewish allusions may appear no more than incidental effects of wit. Yet, as Maurice Molho has brilliantly demonstrated,<sup>17</sup> the poem does after all contain a 'story' – one which lends order to what might otherwise seem no more than a string of random ingenuities. The partially concealed event around which the poem is organized, and to which each item in the sequence points, is the rejection of Christ by the Jews, the crucial moment which divides the Old Dispensation from the New and at the same time establishes the Jew in his role of deicide. It is this 'primal scene' (Molho's term), never overtly present, which activates the potential Jewish references in the apparently neutral items of the series; the image of the sundial, for example, suggests not only a physical object but also the sense in which Judaism itself is 'badly orientated' *vis-à-vis* the Christian God. As for the 'story', it is as if the Genesis narrative – in particular, the progression from fish to animal to man – were being retold from an anti-Jewish point of view, as the prelude to the disastrous judgement of the Elders.<sup>18</sup> This concealed, though ultimately coherent, narrative, needless to say, places the verbal inventions of the poem in a different light, as vehicles of an aggressiveness whose power of ridicule is inseparable from its obliqueness of approach. Why Quevedo should have chosen to be oblique in just this way can only be a matter for speculation; if, as Molho suggests, there were both political and psychological

reasons for avoiding a more direct form of attack, one can only feel that the strategy he adopted, whatever its cause, could in the end hardly be more lethal or more technically brilliant in its presentation of a 'displaced', though ultimately all-pervasive, subject.

Quevedo's anti-Semitism is not of course to be condoned, however much it may owe to tradition or to seventeenth-century perceptions of Christendom and its enemies. The literary roots of this particular poem, in fact, may go back to the *Greek Anthology*, where an epigram by Theodorus (xi, 198) runs: 'Hermocrates belongs to his nose, for if we were to say that the nose belongs to Hermocrates, we should be attributing the greater to the lesser.' This suggests a general feature of satirical writing which has often been remarked on: that, despite the various contemporary touches, the actual objects of satire vary little from one period to another. This is something we noticed earlier in connection with the *Argensolas*;<sup>19</sup> in Quevedo himself, though the emphases fall rather differently – no other seventeenth-century Spanish poet, for example, is so obsessively misogynistic<sup>20</sup> – the range of types, from doctors and lawyers to deceived husbands and *nouveaux riches*, remains remarkably constant, as do the various kinds of vice they embody.

One reason for this is a common awareness of the existing classical tradition: the body of satirical verse most powerfully represented by Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Martial and the poets of the *Greek Anthology*. Quevedo's debt to such poets is often quite explicit: at times he refers directly to particular poems – the Second Satire of Persius, the Eleventh Satire of Juvenal – as supreme examples of their kind, and his first editor, González de Salas, often notes specific lines or phrases which Quevedo has imitated. What is crucial, however, is the way he uses such sources and the attitude to his models which this implies. Certain differences, to be sure, stand out immediately: as Mas is able to show,<sup>21</sup> the long satire on marriage which begins '¿Por qué mi musa descompuesta y bronca / despiertas, Polo...' (Why, Polo, do you awaken my harsh, discordant Muse...; B, p. 670) – supposedly an imitation of the Sixth Satire of Juvenal – owes less than a tenth of its lines to the original; where Juvenal's denunciation of marriage turns into a rambling catalogue of fashionable vices, Quevedo never loses sight of his central subject, whose particular target – the complaisant husband – has no counterpart in the Latin poem. Similarly with Martial, the chief model for Quevedo's anti-feminine

satire, whose epigrammatic concision almost disappears in Quevedo's free translations of individual poems. Such obvious differences can easily distract one from the real nature of Quevedo's engagement with the classical satirists, in which questions of balance and poetic form matter less than the creation of specific kinds of discourse. In the case of Martial, as Lía Schwartz Lerner has recently shown,<sup>22</sup> this often entails an 'active re-reading' of the original text: time and again, Quevedo will take a particular word or rhetorical figure from the Latin and adapt it to his own purposes; alternatively, as in many of his poems addressed to old women – Martial's *vetulae* – he will expand certain features of the original while retaining just enough verbal similarities to enable one to identify the source. The degree of intertextuality this involves is likely to be lost on a modern reader; as Lerner argues, Quevedo repeatedly engages in what amounts to a dialogue with earlier satirical texts, not so much for their referential value, as for their power to generate new strategies of verbal representation in his own language.

The proof of Quevedo's skill in adapting such models lies in his ability to create the kind of tone one instinctively calls 'classical' and which, like that of the classical satirists themselves, can lend itself to a whole range of effects, from the elegantly ironic to the frankly scabrous.<sup>23</sup> Take, for instance, the following sonnet:

Para comprar los hados más propicios,  
como si la deidad vendible era,  
con el toro mejor de la ribera  
ofreces cautelosos sacrificios.

Pides felicidades a tus vicios;  
para tu nave rica y usurera,  
viento tasado y onda lisonjera,  
mereciéndole al golfo precipicios.

Porque exceda a la cuenta tu tesoro,  
a tu ambición, no a Júpiter, engañas;  
que él cargó las montañas sobre el oro.

Y cuando l'ara en sangre humosa bañas,  
tú miras las entrañas de tu toro,  
y Dios está mirando tus entrañas.

(B, p. 62)

In order to buy the most propitious fates, as if deity were for sale, with the finest bull of these plains you offer cunning sacrifices. You beg happiness for your vices, for your rich, profiteering ship a steady wind and a favourable sea, when it deserves ocean chasms. So that your treasure may be past reckoning, you deceive, not Jupiter, but your own ambition; for it was he

who raised mountains above gold. And when you drench the altar with smoking blood, you look into the entrails of your bull, while God is looking into your own.

Here the starting-point is almost certainly the opening of the Second Satire of Persius – ‘Non tu prece poscis emaci, / quae nisi seductis nequeas committere divis...’ (You never try to strike a bargain with heaven, asking the gods for things you would not dare mention except in private) – a passage which Quevedo reverts to more than once.<sup>24</sup> (The whole poem, in fact, can be seen as an expansion of the phrase ‘prece...emaci’: the idea of prayer as a bargain or transaction.) The first thirteen lines add up to what Lerner calls a ‘reconstruction of pagan discourse’,<sup>25</sup> a skilful refashioning of classical language and the kind of subject-matter that goes with it. The latter includes not only the details of what is evidently a Roman sacrifice, but also the characteristically Latin device of the anonymous addressee. The details of the second stanza, on the other hand, hover between two worlds: the reference to the merchant ship is perfectly explicable within the classical context, yet the combination of risky voyages and the exploitation of precious metals seems to edge the poem closer to the time of writing. The effect of the last line is more difficult to gauge. Despite the possible overtones just referred to, there is a continuity between the ‘fates’ of the opening line and the Jupiter who is responsible for the ordering of creation, just as the sequence of present tenses rules out any idea of a gap between the moment of speaking and an earlier time. The last line, however, changes all this: the perspective suddenly shifts, and the allusion to the Christian God creates the effect of distance which has so far been absent – one which firmly separates the speaker from the carefully reconstructed ‘classical’ discourse of the rest.

It is effects like these which prevent Quevedo’s re-writing of classical satire from becoming mere pastiche. Something different occurs, however, when he engages with conventional images of the classical world, and more especially with earlier Renaissance versions of myths. Quevedo is not, of course, the only poet of the time to see the burlesque potential of such material; he is one of those writers, like Góngora and Lope, for whom parody is an almost obligatory exercise, a critical response to forms which are in danger of becoming over-rigid. Yet where Góngora, for example, explores the tragicomic possibilities of the mythological fable, Quevedo usually prefers an

openly disparaging form of parody,<sup>26</sup> as in the first of his two sonnets on Daphne and Apollo:

Bermejazo platero de las cumbres,  
 a cuya luz se espulga la canalla,  
 la ninfa Dafne, que se afufa y calla,  
 si la quieres gozar, paga y no alumbres.  
 Si quieres ahorrar de pesadumbres,  
 ojo del cielo, trata de compralla:  
 en confites gastó Marte la malla,  
 y la espada en pasteles y azumbres.  
 Volvióse en bolsa Júpiter severo;  
 levantóse las faldas la doncella  
 por recogerle en lluvia de dinero.  
 Astucia fue de alguna dueña estrella,  
 que de estrella sin dueña no lo infiero:  
 Febo, pues eres sol, sírvete de ella.

(B, p. 578)

Red-haired silversmith of the mountain tops, by whose light the rabble pick their fleas; the nymph Daphne, who buggers off and is silent, if you want to possess her, pay her and don't shine your light. If you want to spare yourself headaches, eye of the sky, try to buy her; Mars sold his coat of mail for sweets and his sword for pastries and jars of wine. Severe Jupiter turned himself into a purse: the girl lifted her skirts to receive him in a shower of money. This was the stratagem of some duenna-star, since I can't imagine it of a star without a duenna: Phoebus, since you are a sun, make use of her.

The virtual untranslatability of such a poem points to its most striking feature: the constant proliferation of meaning from which scarcely a single word or phrase is exempt. The process, from start to finish, is savagely reductive. The *-azo* suffix of 'Bermejazo' (*bermejo* = 'red') is both augmentative and pejorative: huge, but with a suggestion of Jewishness (Judas traditionally has red hair); 'se afufa', in the third line, is almost certainly a term from thieves' cant, in which 'ninfa' is a common term for a prostitute. In the next stanza, this descent into the criminal underworld is compounded by the double meaning of 'ojo' ('eye', but also 'arsehole'), and by the suggestion that Mars may have pawned his arms to provide a feast for Venus. The story of Danae and Jupiter is similarly transformed: where in the original myth the god descends from a cloud in a shower of gold, he now becomes a purse scattering money into the lap of a willing girl. (The equation money = semen means that her gesture may be read in two ways: she 'lifts up her skirts' to catch the coins and also as a preliminary to sex.) And this clears the way for the

conclusion of the last three lines: 'Such successful encounters could not have occurred without the help of a go-between – literally, a 'duenna-star' – since fate alone (another meaning of 'estrella') would not have sufficed; therefore, use her services yourself, since you are after all a 'sun' (i.e. master of the stars, but also a large gold coin).

This by no means exhausts the possible meanings of the poem,<sup>27</sup> nor does it attempt to suggest the various echoes of Quevedo's other writings which an alert reader may catch. Two things, nevertheless, should be clear, and both are central to Quevedo's satirical writing as a whole. One is the sheer power of an imagination which works with such assurance in the mode of the grotesque, where the violence of the parody itself, as here, may prove stronger than the original parodic intention. The other, though hardly to be separated from this, is once again Quevedo's extraordinary verbal dexterity – in this instance, his ability to use popular language as a distorting lens while preserving the structures of formal rhetoric – which seems able to use virtually any theme as a pretext for its endless self-generating play.

### III

In the first collected edition of Quevedo's verse, the poems are grouped under different 'Muses'; one muse (Thalia) for satire and another (Erato) for love poetry.<sup>28</sup> No seventeenth-century reader would have found this strange: according to the principle of decorum, different 'kinds' require a different approach from the writer, a fact which helps to explain why, questions of temperament apart, Quevedo is both a great love poet and the author of some of the most virulent anti-feminist satire in the language. Thus, rather than attempting to construct a 'personality' capable to combining such apparently contradictory attitudes, one should consider above all what is being said in each individual poem – not only the kind of ideas which are being presented, but also the nature of the speaker who is giving voice to them and the ways in which thought and emotion are impressed on the reader. To do otherwise is to risk serious misunderstanding; as Paul Julian Smith puts it in his fine study of the love poems: 'The emphasis on the writing subject at the expense of the text leads to anachronistic and misleading conclusions'<sup>29</sup> – the kind of conclusions which assert, against all the evidence, that Quevedo is in some sense a 'modern' poet, curiously at odds with his time.

As a way into some of the issues involved here, we might glance back at the sonnet 'En crespas tempestad del oro undoso...' (B, p. 496) which I quoted in chapter 2 (see above, pp. 57-9). There I discussed the poem mainly as an example of *conceptismo*, of the way a poetic conceit may work in practice. As Smith has shown, this involves a particularly dense handling of traditional rhetorical figures, so much so that one may easily overlook other, equally significant, features of the poem. To begin with, there is the question of intertextuality. Like many of Quevedo's poems, this one starts from a conventional *topos* – praise of a woman's hair – which in turn suggests certain basic Petrarchan equivalences or contrasts: hair–gold, fire–water. More specifically, as various critics have pointed out, there are close parallels between Quevedo's poem and one by the Italian poet Giambattista Marino (1569–1625) which begins 'Onde dorate, e l'onde eran capelli...' (Golden waves, and the waves are hairs...).<sup>30</sup> In the end, however, the differences are more notable than the similarities: in Marino's poem, there are no heroic or mythological examples; Quevedo, on the other hand, suppresses Marino's opening reference to the woman's comb – in the Italian, it is the comb, not the heart, which moves through the waves – and avoids the kind of trivializing which has Cupid making chains out of loose hairs. Thus Quevedo's poem is more argumentative, more generalized and above all more elevated in tone – something which reflects both on the speaker and on the woman he addresses. Moreover, if Marino, as is sometimes thought, reflects a new kind of sensibility – one found, a little later, in French *précieux* poetry – this makes Quevedo seem once again an archaizing poet. And Quevedo's relative austerity is emphasized from another direction: as Smith points out, the juxtaposition of Midas and Tantalus already occurs in Ovid (*Amores*, III, vii), in lines which Quevedo must have known; yet where Ovid's speaker almost invariably consummates his desires, such erotic pleasure is quite alien to Quevedo.<sup>31</sup>

Other features of the poem are already familiar from the satirical verse, in particular the sudden change of register brought about by the intrusion of the first-person singular ('que difuntas lloro'). The question of elevated tone, however, is especially pertinent to the love poetry, since it suggests a heroic quality in the speaker – the 'great lover' who associates himself with exceptional mythical figures – and a certain dignity in the addressee for whom such language is considered appropriate. This is not to say that the woman is idealized

in the conventional Petrarchan manner: though physically present, she is also curiously absent – a depersonalized figure whose silence reflects the speaker's inability to communicate with her. This kind of one-sided relationship is also a commonplace of so-called courtly love poetry, a fact which raises once again the question of Quevedo's relationship with previous tradition. As I suggested earlier, there are several features – the idea of suffering through love, the state of 'having and not having' – which relate this poem to the ethos of courtly love, just as there are others – the sense of aspiration associated with Leander and Icarus – which could be thought of as neo-Platonic. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to call this a 'courtly love poem', or even a 'neo-Platonic poem': however much Quevedo uses such ideas, they invariably form part of a unique and complex structure which escapes any simple classification.

What is true here on a small scale can be extended to Quevedo's love poetry as a whole. Though the basis of such poetry is inevitably Petrarchan, any attempt to extract a consistent ethical system from it seems misguided. Notions of courtly love no longer seem as central to his poems as they once did,<sup>32</sup> and efforts to shift the emphasis to neo-Platonism are scarcely more convincing.<sup>33</sup> The danger here lies, as so often, in taking ideas out of their context: though Quevedo frequently makes use of such concepts, more often than not they create the effect of different 'voices' which merge or conflict within the space of the poem. Take, for instance, the following sonnet:

Mandóme, jay Fabioj, que la amase Flora,  
y que no la quisiese; y mi cuidado,  
obediente y confuso y mancillado,  
sin desearla, su belleza adora.

Lo que el humano afecto siente y llora,  
goza el entendimiento, amartelado  
del espíritu eterno, encarcelado  
en el claustro mortal que le atesora.

Amar es conocer virtud ardiente;  
querer es voluntad interesada,  
grosera y descortés caducamente.

El cuerpo es tierra, y lo será, y fue nada;  
de Dios procede a eternidad la mente;  
eterno amante soy de eterna amada.

(B, p. 359)

Alas, Fabio, Flora commanded me to love her and not to desire her; and my passion, obedient and confused and stained, without desiring her, adores her



beauty. What human emotion feels and laments, the understanding enjoys, wooed by the eternal spirit, imprisoned in the mortal cloister which hoards it like a treasure. To love is to know an ardent virtue, to desire is a selfish act of will, perishably gross and discourteous. The body is earth, and will be so, and was nothing; from God the mind proceeds to eternity: I am the eternal lover of an eternal beloved.

Here, the basic contrast between two kinds of love ('querer'/'desear' = 'to desire physically'; 'amar' = 'to love spiritually or platonically') is a commonplace of neo-Platonic theory, and 'cuidado' (a stock word in courtly love vocabulary) suggests the idea of love as suffering which runs through the whole tradition. In Platonic terms, the first tercet can be read as simple definition, leading to the neat conclusion in the final line: 'eterno amante soy de eterna amada'. Yet, taken as a whole, the emotional effect the poem creates in the reader is very different. The '¡ay Fabio!' of the first line sets the tone for the rest. The speaker's love obeys, but is 'confused and 'stained'; in theory, superior love of the understanding transcends the suffering of 'el humano afecto', yet the whole rhetorical strategy of the poem works against this. The key phrase here is 'amartelado del espíritu eterno': 'wooed', but also 'tormented' by the 'eternal spirit'. This emphasizes the conflict between body and mind, since the latter both 'woos' and 'is wooed by' God, and this summons to divine love is a torment to man while his understanding is still imprisoned in the body. Seen in terms of this conflict, the neo-Platonic references fall into place as one of the 'voices' of the poem, as if the speaker were saying: 'I know all about Platonic theory, which says that physical love is only a stage on the way to divine love. I know also that the body dies and the mind is eternal; therefore, if I am forced to love the woman with my mind, I am condemned to being an eternal lover.'

This question of 'voice' takes us back to the notion of a 'rhetorical self' which I referred to at an earlier stage (see above, p. 59). As we have just seen, conflicting 'voices' may emanate from the same speaker; alternatively, as in 'En crespa tempestad...', the presence of mythological allusions may lend a heroic quality to the voice of the lover, whose case is made to seem equally exceptional. In either instance, it would be wrong to think in terms of a 'personality' 'expressing itself', a concept quite foreign to Renaissance theory. In Quevedo's love sonnets, the 'I' which speaks is always mediated – a 'voice' made up of other 'voices' which are woven together within

the confines of the poem. This echo chamber effect is perhaps the most difficult feature of Quevedo's poetry for a modern reader to grasp, since it relies on what Smith calls the 'citational mode',<sup>34</sup> the ability to recognize allusions over a wide range of previous writing, both Renaissance and classical. The difficulty increases when such effects are least conspicuous, that is to say, where an intelligent seventeenth-century reader could be relied on to pick up the most casual of hints. Thus the apparently straightforward sonnet which begins:

A fugitivas sombras doy abrazos;  
 en los sueños se cansa el alma mía;  
 paso luchando a solas noche y día  
 con un trasgo que traigo entre mis brazos... (B, p. 377)

I embrace fleeting shadows: my soul wearies itself in dreams; I spend night and day wrestling alone with a phantom I hold within my arms...

belongs to a long tradition of poems which describe the 'embracing of shadows', including Petrarch's own variant, 'Beato in sogno e di languir contento, / d'abbracciar l'ombre e seguir l'aura estiva...' (Blest in sleep and content to languish, to embrace shadows and follow the summer breeze; *Canzoniere*, 212). Petrarch's sonnet, though Quevedo had almost certainly read it, is hardly close enough to constitute a 'source'; the density of the later poem, on the other hand, lies partly in the suggestions of potent classical myths – Narcissus, Orpheus and Eurydice – which contemporary readers would have been able to elaborate from their own knowledge. For once, this is not a matter of imitation but of invoking parallel situations; and it is precisely here that the idea of 'voices' seems most apt, since it is not just Narcissus and Orpheus who impinge on the poem, but *Ovid's* Narcissus and *Virgil's* Orpheus.<sup>35</sup>

This 'I' which constitutes itself by drawing on the 'voices' of existing texts is also the 'I' which defines itself through its relationship to the woman it addresses. This relationship, as we have already seen, is one-sided: the self of these poems is their sole protagonist, and it is the eloquence of this self – its power of rhetorical persuasion – which enables the poem to take shape. Where Quevedo is concerned, we might press the sense of the 'rhetorical self' still further and claim that the depersonalized nature of the woman addressed is an essential part of the poem's rhetoric – in other words, that the argumentative strategies of the poem actually demand that the woman should

remain an abstraction. We can see something of what this entails in the sonnet entitled 'Retrato de Lisi que traía en una sortija' (Portrait of Lisi which he [i.e. the speaker] wore in a ring):

En breve cárcel traigo aprisionado,  
con toda su familia de oro ardiente,  
el cerco de la luz resplandeciente  
y grande imperio del Amor cerrado.

Traigo el campo que pacen estrellado  
las fieras altas de la piel luciente:  
y a escondidas del cielo y del Oriente,  
día de luz y parto mejorado.

Traigo todas las Indias en mi mano,  
perlas que, en un diamante, por rubíes,  
pronuncian con desdén sonoro yelo,  
y razonan tal vez fuego tirano  
relámpagos de risa carmesíes,  
auroras, gala y presunción del cielo.

(B, p. 506)

In a tiny cell I bear captive, with all its family of burning gold, the circle of resplendent light and the vast empire of Love enclosed. I wear the starry field where the lofty beasts of gleaming skin graze; and concealed from the sky and the Orient, a day of light and better birth. I wear the whole Indies on my hand, pearls which, in a diamond, through rubies, scornfully utter sonorous ice, and speak at times a tyrannical fire, crimson lightning flashes of laughter, dawns, finery and the presumption of heaven.

As Gareth Walters remarks, this is another of those poems in which the opening stance gives way to something different, 'a shrinking away from what appears conventionally prescribed, whether ennoblement or celebration'.<sup>36</sup> What he has in mind is the shift in the speaker's attitude to the woman which takes place in the second quatrain, from implicit praise to the accusation of cruelty. At the same time, there is no question here of conflicting 'voices': the combination of praise and complaint is a regular feature of the Petrarchan sonnet, as is the *topos* of the portrait on which the whole poem is based. In Petrarch himself, the technique of enumerating the woman's physical characteristics entails a curious kind of fragmentation, in which any sense of the woman as a living presence is dissolved in the contemplation of particulars. In Quevedo's poem, this effect is heightened by the addition of a second *topos* – the ring – which brings with it notions of brevity ('en breve cárcel') and hence of concentration within a small space. Much of the poem's ingenuity

comes from the way in which Quevedo works the two *topoi* together: the gold ring sets off the portrait as the woman's hair sets off her face, or as the sun is 'framed' by its own rays – and all of these, one might say, are enclosed by the 'tiny cell' of the poem itself.

The sensuous brilliance of the language, as has often been noticed, comes uncharacteristically close to Góngora,<sup>37</sup> though an image like 'relámpagos de risa carmesíes' (crimson lightning flashes of laughter) – often quoted as an example of Quevedo's 'modernity' – has much older roots, and already appears in slightly less concentrated forms in earlier poems by Quevedo himself. All this indicates that, as so often, Quevedo is revitalizing existing conventions and verbal forms by combining them in new ways. At the same time, the verbal richness is neither arbitrary nor superimposed: by assuming a reader capable of grasping its various subtleties, it both places the poem within the context of other poems which deal with the same *topoi* and reinforces the sense of difference which marks off Quevedo's own achievement. This, one might argue, is partly a matter of exclusion: by avoiding both the sensuality of Latin poetry and the trivializing detail of some of his Spanish and Italian contemporaries, he is deliberately recreating a distinctly Petrarchan kind of lyric – one which he may well have felt to be under threat. And it is this self-denying, generalizing cast of the poem which ultimately determines the basic relationship: the central position of the protagonist – reinforced quite literally by the repeated 'traigo' – for whose discourse the woman is no more than a necessary point of focus, a depersonalized being who exists only as a function of the speaker's rhetoric.

This sonnet, like 'En cresspa tempestad ...', belongs to the sequence of seventy poems addressed to a single woman – 'Lisi' – whose real identity, if she ever had one, remains unknown. Quevedo's first editor, González de Salas, clearly thought that these poems were intended to form a *canzoniere*, though their actual arrangement in print, as he admits, is largely his own.<sup>38</sup> Though there is even less anecdotal material than is usual in such sequences – again, a sign of Quevedo's generalizing tendency – the presence of several anniversary sonnets seems consciously to invite comparison with Petrarch, as does the reference to Lisi's death in the final sonnet. There seems little point in trying to distinguish the Lisi poems from those addressed to other women – Aminta, Flora and others – except to note what is obvious: the increase in range compared with the shorter cycles and the presence of certain poems whose intensity is unequalled by any

other writer of the period. The finest of these is entitled 'Amor constante más allá de la muerte' (Love Constant Beyond Death):

Cerrar podrá mis ojos la postrera  
sombra que me llevare el blanco día,  
y podrá desatar esta alma mía  
hora a su afán ansioso lisonjera;  
mas no, de esotra parte, en la ribera,  
dejará la memoria en donde ardía:  
nadar sabe mi llama la agua fría,  
y perder el respeto a ley severa.

Alma a quien todo un dios prisión ha sido,  
venas que humor a tanto fuego han dado,  
medulas que han gloriosamente ardido,  
su cuerpo dejará, no su cuidado;  
serán ceniza, más tendrá sentido;  
polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado.

(B, p. 511)

The final shadow which will take away from me white day may close my eyes, and an hour indulgent to its anxious longing may set free this soul of mine; but it [i.e. the soul] will not, on the further shore, leave behind the memory in which it used to burn: my flame knows how to swim across the cold water and lose its respect for a harsh law. Soul for which no less than a god has been a prison, veins which have fed moisture to so great a fire, marrows which have gloriously burned, it will abandon its body, but not its love; they will be ash, but it will have feeling; they will be dust, but dust that is in love.

Here, the argumentative tone – 'Cerrar podrá ... podrá desatar ...' – is established from the beginning as a means of introducing the paradox of the second quatrain: the soul whose memory will cross the River Lethe, the 'flame' of love which its waters will not extinguish. In the tercets, however, the argument gives way to celebration: the uncertain future is replaced by a love which has already proved its constancy in the past.<sup>39</sup> The persuasiveness of the poem comes both from the power of its figurative language and from the appearance of logic. Yet this logic, as has often been pointed out, is fallacious: flames can't swim through water, any more than the soul can behave as if it were the body. These non-sequiturs, however, only add to the force of the poem; as Lorna Close puts it:

By means such as these Quevedo eloquently conveys the contradictions of the lover's state, where the power and the glory of the feeling can be measured by its seeming capacity to wrest momentary triumph over and *through* reason itself – a triumph whose poignancy is heightened rather than

nullified by our simultaneous awareness that it falls into the category of *impossibilis* and is proof of vain delusion.<sup>40</sup>

Quevedo plays a number of variations on the 'ceniza amante' (loving ash) theme in the course of the Lisi poems. The theme itself is already present in Roman elegy, most specifically in Propertius;<sup>41</sup> once again, it is a 'classical' voice which speaks through Quevedo's poem: the blurring of the body-soul distinction runs counter to any neo-Platonic conception of love, just as the sense of immortality is divorced from any possible Christian context.<sup>42</sup> As we saw in a previous poem, these 'classical' echoes add to the poise of the speaker, whose reticent gravity determines the whole movement of the poem. And significantly, the woman, in this instance, is completely absent from the poem, as if the speaker were intent on defining himself solely in terms of a love whose godlike status is a measure of his own worth.

IV

The metaphysical implications of a poem like this go far beyond the limits of the conventional love sonnet, as if the subject-matter of love were being drawn more and more deeply into the meditation on human fragility which runs through the more strictly moral poems. Coming in what seems its most natural position almost two-thirds of the way through the sequence, 'Cerrar podrá...' represents a precarious kind of triumph whose claims are progressively undermined in the poems that follow. Thus in one of the later sonnets, 'En los claustros del alma la herida / yace callada...' (In the cloisters of the soul the wound lies silent; B, p. 520), the 'ceniza amante' image appears as the sign of a love which has already burnt itself out *before* death:

Bebe el ardor hidrópica mi vida,  
que ya, ceniza amante y macilenta,  
cadáver del incendio hermoso, ostenta  
su luz en humo y noche fallecida...

My life, mad with thirst, drinks the fire which now, soiled enamoured ash, the corpse of a beautiful conflagration, displays its light expired in smoke and night...

and the poem ends on a note of confusion and horror:

A los suspiros di la voz del canto,  
la confusión inunda l'alma mía,  
mi corazón es reino del espanto.

I surrendered the voice of song to sighs, confusion floods my soul: my heart is the realm of terror.

This ultimate questioning of the value of love itself is partly what makes the Lisi cycle so compelling, and the voice which speaks through a poem like this is scarcely to be distinguished from that in which Quevedo reflects on the human condition in general. Here again, it is sometimes difficult to separate one kind of poem from another: though satire and burlesque, as we have seen, also involve questions of morality, the moral and religious poems I shall be discussing in this section belong to a more 'serious' mode, in which the vocabulary, and occasionally the themes, of the love poetry tend to reappear in quite different contexts. One unifying factor here is the Neostoicism, or Christian version of Stoicism, which Quevedo seems to have adopted as his personal philosophy at a relatively early stage of his career. As Henry Ettinghausen has shown,<sup>43</sup> Quevedo's continuing dialogue with Seneca and other Stoic philosophers leads him into contradictions of which he scarcely seems aware. Nevertheless, both the possibility of associating Stoic imperturbability with Christian fortitude and the relevance of Stoic attitudes to his own critique of contemporary society provide some of the most powerful themes of his own writing, not least the Senecan equation of life with death which returns almost obsessively in both the poetry and the prose.<sup>44</sup>

One of his most famous sonnets is virtually an adaptation of Seneca:

Miré los muros de la patria mía,  
si un tiempo fuertes, ya desmoronados,  
de la carrera de la edad cansados,  
por quien caduca ya su valentía.

Salíme al campo, vi que el sol bebía  
los arroyos del yelo desatados,  
y del monte quejosos los ganados,  
que con sombras hurtó su luz al día.

Entré en mi casa: vi que, amancillada,  
de anciana habitación era despojos;  
mi báculo, más corvo y menos fuerte.

Vencida de la edad sentí mi espada,  
y no hallé cosa en que poner los ojos  
que no fuese recuerdo de la muerte.

(B, p. 32)

I beheld the walls of my native place, if once strong, now dilapidated, weary with the passage of time, through which their bravery now fails. I went out

into the fields, I saw that the sun was drinking up the streams released from the ice, and that the cattle were complaining of the mountain which stole the light of day with its shadows. I went into my house; I saw that, stained, it was the remnants of an ancient habitation; my staff, more bent and less strong; I felt my sword overcome by age, and I found nothing on which to rest my eyes which was not a reminder of death.

'Patria' here has a distinctly Latin, if not Ovidian, ring to it: not so much 'native land' as 'birthplace' or 'ancestral home'.<sup>45</sup> The main source, however, is Seneca's Twelfth Letter to Lucilius, describing a visit to the author's country house, which begins: 'Wherever I turn, I see fresh evidence of my old age.'<sup>46</sup> It is usual, and natural enough, to read this sonnet as a reflection on time and decay, as a moral poem of a peculiarly 'classical' kind, in which the 'house' is both a real house and a metaphor for the human body. But supposing we were to think of it as a religious poem? An earlier, though not essentially different, version<sup>47</sup> appears in the sequence of 'Psalms' entitled *Heráclito cristiano y segunda arpa a imitación de David* (Christian Heraclitus and Second Harp in Imitation of David), written in 1613. At this time, or a little before it, Quevedo appears to have undergone what Ettinghausen calls an 'acute and prolonged crisis of conscience'.<sup>48</sup> The intention of the poems is penitential, as his note 'To the Reader' makes clear:

You who have heard what I have sung and what was dictated to me by appetite, passion or nature, hear now, with a purer ear, what true feeling and repentance for all the rest of my deeds impel me to say: for these things I lament since knowledge and conscience demand it, and I sang of those other matters since thus I was persuaded by my youth (B, p. 19).<sup>49</sup>

What is crucial, however, is that the twenty-eight poems of the *Heráclito cristiano* form a genuine sequence: though, as Walters points out, the note of resolution wavers from time to time – the lover and the moralist seem frequently in conflict – the last poem of all is both a renunciation of love and an act of dedication to God. Though in the circumstances it is hard to think of this as a definitive ending, the essential movement of the sequence is from the necessary destruction of the sinner's former self to the emergence of a new self through repentance. And read in its context, 'Miré los muros...' takes on a different, more strictly religious, meaning, in which the picture of time and decay is no longer absolute, but a description of the world as it must necessarily appear to the unregenerate soul.



This interpretation is reinforced by Quevedo's use of the Pauline concept of the 'new man',<sup>50</sup> as in the opening poem of the sequence:

Un nuevo corazón, un hombre nuevo  
 ha menester, Señor, la ánima mía;  
 desnúdame de mí, que ser podría  
 que a tu piedad pagase lo que debo.  
 Dudosos pies por ciega noche llevo,  
 que ya he llegado a aborrecer el día,  
 y temo que hallaré la muerte fría  
 envuelta en (bien que dulce) mortal cebo.  
 Tu hacienda soy; tu imagen, Padre, he sido,  
 y, si no es tu interés en mí, no creo  
 que otra cosa defiende mi partido.  
 Haz lo que pide verme cual me veo,  
 no lo que pido yo: pues, de perdido,  
 recato mi salud de mi deseo.

(B, p. 20)

My soul, Lord, requires a new heart, a new man: strip me of myself, that I may pay what I owe to your piety. I walk with stumbling feet through blind night, for now I have come to hate the day, and I fear that I shall find cold death wrapped in a mortal (though sweet-tasting) bait. I am your creature; I have been your image, Father, and, but for your interest in me, I think there is nothing else to defend my cause. Do what seeing me as I am demands, not what I myself demand: since, being lost, I conceal my salvation from my desire.

A poem like this has a good deal in common with those of Lope de Vega discussed in chapter 4 (see above, pp. 105–10), though the quality of the argument, as one might expect with Quevedo, is more subtle. As always with such poems, the reader – or at least the possible second reader – is God Himself, and it is to God that the persuasive forces of the poem are directed. The basic strategem consists in shifting the emphasis from God the judge to God the advocate, in such a way that the sinner's weakness becomes a source of strength. The most obvious sign of this movement is the parallel shift from 'Lord' ('Señor') to 'Father'. In the opening lines, God is a creditor – someone to whom the speaker owes a debt; by the first tercet, however, He has become the one person capable of defending the sinner's cause. Two other features of the poem help to enforce this change. One is the series of commercial metaphors which runs from the payment of debts to ideas of property and interest. ('Tu hacienda', in line 9, is particularly telling here: literally, 'your creature', but also 'your property' – in other words, something one

has a responsibility to administer.) The other is the way the speaker sustains and exploits the division between the 'old' man and the 'new' already established in the first line. This makes possible the paradox two lines later, where 'mí' equals 'my old self', and also underwrites the conflicting claims of the understanding and the senses at the end of the second quatrain. At the end of the poem, the division is re-stated, again in religious terms, in the contrast between 'salvation' and 'desire'. Yet just before this, something more subtle has taken place: the phrase 'tu imagen... he sido' (I was once your image) looks back for a moment to the original Creation, when Adam – the 'old' man – was made in the image of God. And the implication is surely clear: the redemption of the sinner – in St Paul's phrase, the 'putting on of the new man' – will involve nothing less than a new act of creation, a reversal of the original Fall of Adam.

Such openly religious poems, though often impressive, form only a small part of Quevedo's work.<sup>51</sup> More usually, his most serious reflections on human life occur in what Blecua calls the 'metaphysical' poems, of which there are several examples in the *Heráclito cristiano* itself. Here the sense of living speech recalls similar poems by Quevedo's English contemporary John Donne (1572–1631). Like Donne, he is a master of the arresting opening:

¡Cómo de entre mis manos te resbalas!  
¡Oh, cómo te deslizas, edad mía!... (B, p. 33)

How you slip from my hands! O age, how you slide away!...; or again:

Ya formidable y espantoso suena  
dentro del corazón el postrer día;... (B, p. 9)

Now fearful and terrible the final day sounds within my heart...

Even more characteristic of these poems is a quality which has sometimes been termed 'transparency': the sense that, though Quevedo's rhetorical skills are never in abeyance, his manner of deploying them is so natural as to seem inevitable. And occasionally his powers of verbal invention reshape the elements of the language itself in a way which goes beyond anything attempted by his contemporaries:

¡Ah de la vida!'... ¿Nadie me responde?  
¡Aquí de los antaños que he vivido!  
La Fortuna mis tiempos ha mordido;  
las Horas mi locura las esconde.

¡Que sin poder saber cómo ni adónde  
 la salud y la edad se hayan huído!  
 Falta la vida, asiste lo vivido,  
 y no hay calamidad que no me ronde.  
 Ayer se fue, mañana no ha llegado;  
 hoy se está yendo sin parar un punto;  
 soy un fue, y un será, y un es cansado.

En el hoy y mañana y ayer, junto  
 pañales y mortaja, y he quedado  
 presentes sucesiones de difunto.

(B, p. 4)

'Hello there, life!' ... No one replies? Here with you, past years that I have lived! Fortune has gnawed away my time; my folly hides the Hours. That without being able to know how or whither, health and years have flown away! Life is absent, what has been lived is present, and there is no calamity which does not haunt me. Yesterday is gone; tomorrow has not arrived; today is going without a moment's pause; I am a 'was', and a 'will be' and a weary 'is'. In my today, tomorrow and yesterday, I join together swaddling clothes and shroud, and I remain the present successions of a dead man.

Here, the colloquial tone is established in the opening words: "'¡Ah de la vida!'" builds on the common phrase '¡Ah de la casa!' (Is there anyone in?) – the cry of a traveller arriving at a house, but now twisted, so that the 'house' is the speaker's own life, whose emptiness echoes only with his own voice. The implied metaphor extends into the second line. 'Aquí de ...' is a phrase normally used to summon assistance: what are being summoned here, however, are 'los antaños' – a plural noun made out of the adverb 'año' (last year; in former times). Again, the verbal twist reinforces the general sense: to recall one's past life is like calling for servants or followers in a deserted house. This estrangement of the speaker from his own life, so vividly dramatized in the opening lines, is encapsulated in the astonishing paradox of verse 7; here, the apparent contrast between 'falta' (is lacking) and 'asiste' (is present) is an illusion: if 'life' is absent, the past ('lo vivido') which is 'present' to the speaker has itself already been defined as an absence, so that being and non-being are ultimately indistinguishable. From this point onwards, the emphasis shifts from space to time: in the first tercet, both syntax and punctuation reinforce the disjunction of past, present and future, as if the present moment were simply a transition from one absence to another. What is remarkable here is the way this sense of dislocation is carried into the sentence itself: 'se está yendo' (is going away) is

already an unusual form of the verb 'ir' (to go), and this verbal deviation is compounded by the extraordinary eleventh line, where the three tenses of the verb 'to be' are wrenched into defining nouns. This triple self-definition – the speaker is past, present and future *simultaneously* – firmly sweeps aside any question of disjunction or continuity. Birth and death are emblematically joined as all tenses are telescoped into one, and the last line has the chilling precision, and also the Latinate sound, of a legal formula: if each moment – each 'present' – dies as another succeeds, then individual existence is a continuous series of deaths, in which life and death are ultimately synonymous.<sup>52</sup>

If one calls such a poem 'metaphysical', this is partly out of deference to literary history, partly because it embodies the kind of problems traditionally associated with metaphysics. Quevedo himself, however, would probably have found the term strange; as I have tried to suggest all along, he would have been much more likely to have explained both his aims and practice in the light of Renaissance theory, in particular the notion of 'eloquence' which Quintilian defines as 'the production and communication to the audience of all that the speaker has conceived in his mind'.<sup>53</sup> If the intensely verbal nature of his art and the persuasive power of its rhetoric are qualities which he felt it necessary to defend, this is both a measure of his trust in earlier tradition and the sign of an achievement which, for all its apparent 'modernity', can only be fully understood in the terms which he himself would have recognized.